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AUTHOR   Hunt, Russell A.; Hejl, Peter
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ABSTRACT
                This paper describes the present "state of the art" of the
field of "empirical studies of literature" and explains how this state has
come about, given the interdisciplinary and international character of the
groups involved. This entails looking at the relationships among, for
example, the disciplinary and national influences on the nature of the work
done in the community and on the relations between its members. The field can
be described as an emerging discourse community (a social system with a
"synreferential domain")--that is, researchers in the field share a set of
assumptions about what the "subject matter" of the field is, what questions
are important to ask about it, and what answers to those questions are
valuable. The paper outlines how researchers propose to do this research and
suggests some hypotheses. (NKA)

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by Russell A. Hunt

Peter Hejl

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Russell A. Hunt, Department of English, St. Thomas University

Peter Hejl, LUMIS, Universität GH Siegen

The State of the Art in Empirical Studies of Literature:

The Emergence of an International and

Interdisciplinary Scholarly / Scientific "Field"

A Progress Report

IGEL 1996

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What's This All About?

We wish to describe as fully as possible the present "state of the art" of this field and then to explain (as far as possible) how this "state" has come about, given the interdisciplinary and international character of the group involved.

This entails looking at the relationships among, for example, the disciplinary and national influences on the nature of the work done in the community and on the relations between its members.

We believe that the field can be described as an emerging discourse community (a social system with a "synreferential domain") -- that is, researchers in the field share a set of assumptions about what the "subject matter" of the field is, what questions are important to ask about it and what answers to those questions are valuable.

Why Bother?

We believe this study is potentially valuable both as a contribution to the field of Empirical Studies of Literature itself, offering a reflective awareness of the shape of the field, and also as a contribution to the sociology of science.

A basic assumption of our work is that Empirical Studies of Literature constitutes an emerging academic or scholarly or scientific field. This implies that there are systematic relations between different studies done in this field, and that a description of them will uncover structural and developmental patterns that will help us understand not only the field, but the process by which such systems emerge.

It should go without saying that an overview of the field would help identify what we might call "blank spots on the map" -- domains where we would expect work to be done but where no one is doing it -- and

to understand why this might be the case. It should further help us plan our work, decide on what kinds of work need to be done and are most likely to be valued by colleagues (and granting bodies), and that might be most appropriate for graduate study and theses.

How We Propose to Do This

1. Ask the Oracle

We are employing a modified Delphi procedure. This can perhaps best be described as a semi-structured expert-hearing in written form with at least one feedback loop. Starting with the members of IGEL as the core group of expert informants, we will try to establish the larger group to be included in our study, produce a preliminary description of the field, and conduct a second round based on that preliminary description.

In order to produce such a study we need to know in general how practitioners in the field perceive the "state of the art," and their own work and the way it relates to that of others.

We do not need full descriptions of the state of the art from individual informants. We have begun with a set of straightforward questions (pp. 5-7 of this document) which we hoped would not be seen as requiring asking informants to make a synthesis of the whole field, but only to report their own immediate perceptions and judgements. We would be happy to have suggestions for extending this list of questions or rephrasing them to make our intentions clearer.

> (If you have not yet responded to the questions we sent out, or never received them, please do so as soon as possible. In order to proceed to the second stage, we need responses from everyone active in the field, and to date we have had a surprisingly low response to the original mailing.)

2. Mapping the Territory

One way in which we might understand and display the structure of the field, as we learn about it from our expert informants, is to arrange individual studies on a chart. Currently we are working with a chart (p. 8 of this document) arranged along two axes. One classifies studies according to their primary focus (for instance, whether they focus on production, distribution, reception, or postprocessing), and the other according to their level of analysis -- whether they consider primarily individuals (e.g. studies of individual authors or individual readers), small social systems (small groups, for instance, who explicitly work together) or larger social systems (for example, studies of national networks for distributing literary texts). An important aspect of the method is that it is interactive -- that is, because it is a Delphi-like procedure, everyone involved has opportunities to affect the final classification, and, indeed, to influence the classification system itself. At the moment, we believe the system we have devised includes the ideas we have recieved so far, but of course new information may mean that we will have to revise the system or even change it fundamentally.

3. The Documentary Record

Further, we propose as part of this study -- but only after we have completed our characterization of the

field as a whole based on consultations with practitioners -- to conduct a bibliometric analysis. This would entail identifying a corpus of publications (drawn from Poetics, Spiel, IGEL conference presentations and other sources), and analyzing it according to types of publication, nature of authorship (for instance, collaborative or individual work, nationality or cultural backgrounds of authors, discipline-specific or interdisciplinary), patterns of citation and reference, and so forth.

This is not a meta-analysis of research, but a part of a sociological study of the relation between the state of the art in ESL and the nature of the group which conducts research in this field.

Some Hypotheses

The state of the art in this field will, we hypothesize, be shaped in significant measure by two sets of factors: (1) the backgrounds and contexts of individuals who practice in it, and (2) the degree to which the field has emerged as a distinctive scholarly or research enterprise.

1. The backgrounds and contexts of individuals may influence the shape of the field in at least three domains:

- General cultural context. What questions are important in various cultural contexts will affect selection of topics as well as how research is planned and conducted.

- Disciplinary cultures. Discipline-specific definitions of the reality to which the discipline is oriented and of the subject matter it is concerned with can shape what questions will be asked and valued and how they will be investigated.

- Institutional context. How universities and other research institutions are organized in various countries will shape the sort of research that can get funding, be supported, be recognized as valuable, etc. National science systems (for example, nationally supported research granting bodies) have policies for supporting research that will constrain what work gets done.

2. In the earliest stages of the emergence of such a field, most participants have primary allegiances to already existing disciplines. As a field becomes more fully defined and recognized, it becomes more possible for them to obtain professional recognition, collegial cooperation and support, publication, and academic advancement in that field. Further (and perhaps more important), scholarly and research work becomes more independent from the existing disciplines, and new questions -- and eventually methods -- can be developed.


Click on this link to see the questions we are using for the first stage of this study. If you haven't yet responded to them, or would like to elaborate or make more concrete an earlier response, we would be happy to receive responses (on a separate document) either by post or electronic mail). We need them as soon as possible.

In every case, we would like to be very clear that we are not asking you to respond with a synthesis of the

field, but rather with your own immediate perceptions. In some cases, we have learned that potential respondents thought we were asking for a substantial review of the literature or a synthesis of a wide range of texts, or for a full bibliography. This is not what we intended.

There are two types of questions: questions where a choice is provided or where only short answers are expected, and questions where you are invited to answer on separate sheets and at some length.

- The most convenient way to respond is to work on a separate document and simply number the responses. In some cases we have provided spaces for short answers: you can photocopy this form or (this will be easiest in most cases) or create a response under the appropriate question number on the separate document.

- You are welcome to answer in English, German or French.

- Further comments / suggestions would be eagerly welcomed. As this is a Delphi-type procedure, we expect that most responses will be occasions for further dialogue rather than data to be processed. We are trying to elicit knowledge from experts rather than to fit information into pre-defined categories.
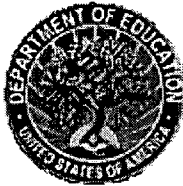
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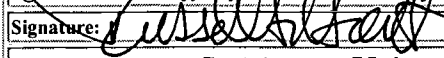
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Signature:	Printed Name/Position/Title: Russell A. Hunt, Prof. of English

Organization/Address: St. Thomas University Fredericton NB Canada E3B 5G3	Telephone: 506-452-0424	Fax: 506-450-9615
	E-mail Address: hunt@stthomasu.ca	Date: 8/1/2001

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